

CITY FOCUS

LE TOUQUET

Perennially popular with Parisians, Le Touquet Paris-Plage celebrates a special British connection this year too. **Gillian Thornton** explores the resort that rose from the sand



The colourful architecture of Le Touquet's centre are among the town's many delights

Imagine for a moment the heady years following the Great War. After four years of trench warfare and devastating loss, Western Europe is at last able to focus on a brighter future and, for those with money to spend, few places are brighter than Le Touquet Paris-Plage

In the 1920s and '30s, this stylish town on the Pas de Calais coast was Europe's most fashionable resort, with its vast sandy beach and wide range of leisure activities. Dine out at one of Le Touquet's chic restaurants, drop into one of the two casinos, or take your place in the grandstand for an afternoon at the races, and you never knew who you might meet. Regular visitors included the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Noël Coward, PG Wodehouse and Sir Winston Churchill.

If you had cash to splash, there was no finer place to stay than the Hotel Westminster, which this year celebrates its centenary. This iconic hotel was named in honour of the then Duchess of Westminster who had set up and sponsored a hospital during the Great War at one of the nearby casinos. Demand for the Westminster's upmarket services grew rapidly and within two years, it had more than doubled in size from 100 to 250 rooms.

Today, 100 years after it welcomed its first guests, the Hôtel Barrière le Westminster remains an iconic address in a resort that appeals to a wide variety of holidaymakers from families to sports fans and media stars to international businessmen. With an international airport, high-speed rail links to Paris, and easy motorway access to the Channel ports, Le Touquet can rightly claim to be the Jewel of the Opal Coast – quite an achievement for a resort that didn't even exist until the late 19th century.

A LAWYER AND A NEWSPAPER MAN

The story begins in 1855 when Parisian lawyer Alphonse Daloz bought the Domaine du Touquet, a triangular area of seaside scrubland covering 1,600 hectares with its northern tip at the mouth of the Canche estuary. He stabilised the shifting sands by planting trees, built himself a château, and soon began inviting his Parisian friends for hunting parties in his new forest.

Among the high-profile guests was Hippolyte de Villemessant, founder of *Le Figaro* newspaper, who instantly saw the potential of the site. Why not create a seaside resort here on the edge of the forest, he suggested to Daloz in 1874 – and in 1882,

the Paris-Plage project was launched with the intention of attracting Parisian holidaymakers. Within a year, there were 30 permanent residents and a housing development, together with a semaphore and two lighthouses.

By the early 20th century, Paris-Plage was also attracting wealthy clients from across the Channel, thanks to Englishman Sir John Whitley, who had bought the area in 1902 following the death of Daloz in 1885. Whitley built luxury hotels, two casinos and various sports facilities, renaming the resort Le Touquet-Paris-Plage in 1912. Halfway between London and Paris, the town soon became a must on the British society circuit with a racecourse, golf course and France's first clay tennis court.

During the Second World War, Le Touquet's lively leisure scene was inevitably put on hold as occupying German troops moved into the town's comfortable villas and hotels. The Westminster became a hospital and then lodgings for two German army regiments, finally reopening to paying guests in 1946. Amongst its biggest fans in the post-war years were Edith Piaf and Ian Fleming, who is said to have written *Casino Royale* – his first 007 story – whilst staying at the hotel. And the James

FIVE MUST-DO ACTIVITIES

A town born out of the fashion for pleasure-seeking, Le Touquet has numerous irresistible pastimes to offer. Here are our top five...



SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Browse the fashion retailers, specialist gift shops, and accessories boutiques in the town centre, but leave time to soak up the colours and aromas of the fresh produce at the Art Deco covered market in Rue Saint-Jean. Open on Thursday and Saturday mornings, as well as Mondays in summer, the building is classified an Historic Monument for its half-moon shape and arches.



PAMPER YOURSELF

Enjoy the healing powers of seawater and minerals with a range of treatments at Le Touquet's two thalassotherapy hotels overlooking the beach, or try more traditional spa treatments at the Spa de La Petite Forêt www.spa.accor.com. Or chill out at the Nuxe Spa in the Hotel Westminster; the Opale at the Grand Hotel; or the Villa Claude Maxime.



TAKE TO THE WATER

Indulge in your favourite water sport or maybe even try a new one. Book a lesson in sand-yachting (*char à voile*) on Le Touquet's 7km stretch of fine sandy beach, go sea wading (*longe-côte*) or try stand-up paddle boarding, surfing or kite-surfing. You can also take to the water of the Canche in a canoe, paddle-boat or catamaran. There really is something to suit everyone.



GET ACTIVE ON DRY LAND

Golfers can choose from two 18-hole golf courses and one nine-hole, whilst horse riders of all levels can enjoy both beach and forest rides organised from Le Touquet's Equestrian Centre. Prefer to travel on two wheels? Then explore more than 28km of protected off-road cycle paths leading through the forest and beside the glorious coastline.



EXPLORE THE CANCHE BAY

Partially classified as a National Nature Reserve since 1987, the bay is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna from orchids to seals. From April through to September, you can take a guided cruise excursion to discover the wildlife of the bay, or book a guided nature tour and explore this rich and fascinating area on foot. >>



Clockwise from top: Enjoy a cocktail on the beach at Les Pirates; colourful beach huts line the sand; Le Touquet's belfry, just one of the many splendid architectural sights to be enjoyed; have a go at horse riding; there are plenty of sporting activities on offer

Bond connection doesn't stop there. Sean Connery signed his first 007 contract at the Westminster and Roger Moore was also a regular guest.

Today, Le Touquet continues to provide something for everyone despite having barely 4,000 permanent residents. And even though the population swells considerably during the summer months, it's not hard to find a quiet spot on the broad sandy beach, beneath the trees of the scented forest, and around the Canche estuary. For a seagull's eye view of the bay, climb the 274 steps to the top of the lighthouse.

As you browse the stylish boutiques and admire the eclectic mix of public and private properties, you can easily imagine those stylish years between the wars when the future King Edward VIII was regularly spotted at a casino table and movie stars rubbed shoulders in Le Touquet's popular cocktail bars.

Part of the resort's enduring charm lies in the Belle Époque villas and Art Deco properties that sit in shady plots on quiet avenues at the edge of the forest. Hire a bike or Segway, book onto a guided tour at the Tourist Office, or set off on foot for a self-guided tour with the help of the route map, free to download from the Tourist Office's website.

Le Touquet's story unfolds in a series of historic buildings and open spaces that line the 3.5km trail, starting at the tennis club named in honour of Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the

"IT'S NOT HARD TO FIND A QUIET SPOT ON THE BEACH, BENEATH THE TREES OF THE SCENTED FOREST"

modern Olympics, who inaugurated the Paris-Plage sports facilities in 1903. It passes through the Ypres Garden, landscaped in 1905 to commemorate thousands of Belgian refugees who arrived during the Great War, and on past the chalet-style villas of the Village Suisse that marked the entrance to the town in 1906.

FROM ART TO ARCHITECTURE

Art Deco is evident round every corner. As well as the post office, town hall and indoor market, all built between 1927 and 1932, Le Touquet is home to many eye-catching period homes. One of the largest is the Way Side Villa, which was built in 1925 in the Anglo-Norman style for the wife of the United States Ambassador. It is now home to the Édouard Champion Museum (named after the first curator of the town museum), which hosts both temporary exhibitions and permanent artworks from the 19th century to the present day.

From here it's a short walk to Place Quentovic, the pedestrian heart of Le Touquet, which is named after an ancient river port located further inland up the Canche. Here you can buy local produce at the craft and food markets on Thursday evenings and Sunday mornings, browse the boutiques, or watch the world go by from a bar or restaurant.

Still a favourite with Parisian and British holidaymakers, Le Touquet-Paris-Plage is first and foremost a seaside holiday resort. But more than a century after its official launch, the Jewel of the Opal Coast also stages a wide range of high-profile sports meetings, business events and concerts throughout the year. The aim of its two visionary pioneers – one French, one English – was to turn an area of seaside scrubland into a chic seaside bolthole offering something for everyone. And more than a century later, Le Touquet is still doing just that, in its own inimitable style. **FT**

LE TOUQUET ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY CAR Le Touquet is 70km from Calais, around 1 hour by car on the A16 autoroute, J25 or J26.

BY TRAIN From Paris, take the train from Lille or Paris Gare du Nord to Étaples-Le Touquet and then the shuttle bus into town www.lecaddyexpress.com. Fastest journey time 2 hours 11 minutes.

BY PLANE Fly to Le Touquet Elizabeth II International Airport from Beauvais, Lille Lesquin and Paris airports www.aeroport-letouquet.com

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Barrière Le Westminster: The recently renovated hotel marks its 100th anniversary this year. Dine at a choice of two restaurants including Michelin-starred **Le Pavillon**, which combines Art Deco detail with contemporary style. www.hotelsbarriere.com

TOURIST INFORMATION

Call in at the Tourist Office on Avenue du Verger; letouquet.com

